

An Inquiry into the Persistence of the System of Conferring Civil Examination Degrees and Official Posts under the Late Qing Educational Reforms

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Abstract

To encourage the establishment of schools, the Qing government granted graduates of domestic new-style schools and returned overseas students graded civil examination degrees (chushen) supplemented by official posts. The abolition of the imperial civil examination system in 1905 marked a pivotal turning point in Chinese educational history, yet the system of conferring such degrees and posts—a mechanism deeply entwined with the examination system—survived until the fall of the Qing dynasty. This paper traces the historical evolution of this system, explores the reasons for its endurance as a transitional policy, analyzes its positive role in advancing new-style education, and dialectically examines its inherent drawbacks, namely the conflation of talent cultivation with official selection and the fostering of a utilitarian academic ethos. In so doing, it illuminates both the historical inevitability and the limitations of this system within the broader transition of Chinese education.

Keywords

Imperial Civil Examination System; System of Conferring Civil Examination Degrees and Official Posts; New-Style Education; Transitional Policy; Dialectical Evaluation

1. The Historical Evolution of the System of Conferring Civil Examination Degrees and Official Posts

The system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts emerged alongside the rise of new learning and the surge in dispatching students abroad during the late Qing period. In the 1860s, in order to cultivate personnel for the Self-Strengthening Movement, the Qing government established new-style schools such as the Jingshi Tongwenguan (the Imperial Translators' College) and initiated overseas education programmes. However, dominated as it was by the traditional civil examination system, these measures encountered a severe crisis of social

legitimacy. To attract literati participation, Yixin, in the Regulations for the Newly Established Tongwenguan, invoked precedents and proposed awarding official ranks of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades to those with outstanding achievement. When selecting young boys to study in the United States, Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang likewise promised that upon their return they would be “memorialised for the bestowal of official insignia, ranks, and substantive appointments.” During this period, however, such measures remained piecemeal, largely confined to low-level statuses such as jiansheng (student of the Imperial Academy), and had not yet crystallised into a formal system.

The system was progressively standardised as the New Policies of the late Qing introduced educational reforms. In 1902, the Imperially Approved School Regulations drafted under the direction of Zhang Baixi enshrined the conferral of official degrees upon graduates as an explicit policy. This principle was preserved in the 1904 Presented School Regulations, which further elaborated a hierarchical system of rewards spanning from higher primary schools to the Tongruiyuan (the Imperial Academy-equivalent graduate school): graduates of middle schools and equivalent institutions were to be awarded the status of gongsheng (tribute student); graduates of higher schools the status of juren (provincial graduate); graduates of universities the status of jinshi (metropolitan graduate); and graduates of the Tongruiyuan the status of Hanlin academician. Thus, a complete reward framework covering the entire school system was established. Through these regulations, the system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts was formally embedded as a key component of the late Qing modern school structure, no longer a set of ad hoc measures.

The civil examination system itself was abolished in 1905, yet the closely associated system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts persisted until the Qing government’s demise in 1912; it was only gradually dismantled after the Provisional Government of the Republic of China, spearheaded by bourgeois revolutionaries, promoted the overhaul of the educational system. This prolongation was, in essence, a response to the imperative of bridging the old and new systems of education and official selection. The system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts thus endured precisely as a transitional policy designed to fill the void left by the abolition of the examinations.

2. The Causes for its Existence as a Transitional Policy

The persistence of the system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts as a transitional policy stemmed fundamentally from the irreconcilable tension between entrenched traditional values and the urgent demands of reform in late Qing educational transformation. This can be analysed through the lenses of popular psychology, institutional continuity, and practical conditions.

Over its millennium-long existence, the civil examination system had deeply

embedded the dictum “excellence in learning leads to officialdom” in the public consciousness. Gaining a degree was not merely a pathway to office but a determinant of an individual’s social standing and his family’s prestige. In traditional China, the object of academic reward was, practically speaking, “not academic achievement itself, but the scholar’s socio-political status”; examination degrees constituted the very foundation upon which scholar-officials could enjoy corresponding social privileges and political rights. Consequently, the acquisition of tangible benefits was the most powerful incentive motivating the populace to pursue learning. As Zhang Zhidong asserted, “Though schools may be established, if there is no ladder to advancement, people will not willingly attend them.” This deep-seated psychological reliance on formal degrees meant that for new-style schools to flourish rapidly, it was imperative to furnish their graduates with concrete returns—hence the system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts resonated profoundly with the mindset of the common people.

Furthermore, the abrupt abolition of the civil examinations had rendered the official selection mechanism unsustainable. On the one hand, the traditional system of bureaucratic selection relied on examination degrees as credentials, so graduates of new-style schools, despite their practical knowledge in fields like mathematics, law, and political science, were effectively excluded from the bureaucracy because they lacked the imprimatur of an official degree. The renowned late Qing scholar Yan Fu was acutely aware of this dilemma: as an early returned student, he had devoted himself from 1885 onwards to taking the civil examinations, failing repeatedly, and it was not until 1909 that he was belatedly granted the status of jinshi in letters. He lamented, “If one’s background does not proceed from the examination system, what one says is largely disregarded.” On the other hand, following the examination’s abolition, existing degree-holders—stipendiary students, juren, and gongsheng—were suddenly deprived of a clear path for promotion. The system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts offered both a transitional identity for this old scholar-gentry class and a channel into officialdom for new learning talents, thereby rendering the shift in criteria for official selection a buffered, gradual process rather than a sharp rupture.

When examined at the level of practical conditions, late Qing society simply did not possess the requisite foundation to support an independently functioning modern education system and civil service. The effective operation of new institutions requires a host of corresponding supporting conditions, yet such conducive cultural and social preconditions originally did not exist within Chinese society. The new-style schools upon which so many hopes were pinned remained immature in terms of teaching staff, funding, and curricula. As the newspaper Shen Bao recorded, rural schools in the late Qing era commonly faced

the triple dilemma of “difficulties in fundraising, difficulties in enrolling students, and difficulties in hiring instructors.” Under such circumstances, had the reward mechanism tied to the civil examination degrees been entirely discarded at that juncture, it is highly probable that the new-style education would have stagnated for sheer lack of appeal.

3. A Dialectical Evaluation of the System of Conferring Civil Examination Degrees and Official Posts

3.1. Positive Effects

Although the system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts was, in essence, the product of compromise, it played an indispensable and positive role in the educational transition of the late Qing era. The table below, which compares the number of schools in the last years of the Qing dynasty, illustrates how the system effectively stimulated a wave of school founding at a time when new-style schools faced a crisis of social legitimacy—the year-on-year increase in school numbers is clear evidence of this effect. This growth was directly linked to the promise of degrees and official positions. For instance, graduates of the specialised colleges of the Imperial University of Peking who “ranked in the highest class upon examination were to be granted the status of jinshi and appointed as compilers or revisers in the Hanlin Academy” ; graduates of higher industrial schools who placed at the top were “to be granted juren status and preferentially appointed as department magistrates.” Such explicit guarantees of formal degrees and office led all the literati under heaven to conclude that “apart from the school track, there is no other ladder to advancement,” causing a massive shift of scholar-gentry into new-style schools and thereby laying a solid foundation of enrolment for the popularisation of new learning.

Table 1. Statistical Table of the Number of Schools in the Late Qing Dynasty (1903 - 1910)

Year	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
	Table column subhead	Subhead	Subhead					
Number of Schools	769	4476	8277	23862	37888	47995	59117	42696

In addition, through its system of granting degrees by specialised subject and its examination mechanisms, the system supplied a cohort of specialised personnel for the late Qing New Policies. The qualifying examinations for the degree rewards “conferred different civil examination degrees according to the academic attainments of graduates from overseas and domestic higher specialised schools,”

and emphasised dual competence in both new knowledge and traditional cultivation. Returning students from Japan were required to pass examinations in two categories—modern sciences and Chinese classical studies—while domestic school graduates had to pass both a graduation examination emphasizing new knowledge and a re-examination by the Ministry of Education covering classical texts such as the *Zizhi Tongjian* and the Great Qing Code. The talents selected through this model were equipped both with modern professional expertise and with a grounding in traditional culture. Examples include Zhan Tianyou, who, after being granted the engineering jinshi, presided over the construction of the Beijing-Zhangjiakou Railway, and Yan Huiqing, who participated in diplomatic affairs in his capacity as a jinshi in law and political science. Such individuals provided crucial human resources for the modernisation of industry, diplomacy, education, and other fields in the late Qing.

At the same time, the system of conferring civil examination degrees and posts mitigated social turbulence during the transitional period after the abolition of the examinations, averting the class conflicts that institutional overhauls so often provoke and fostering stability in a transforming society. On one hand, as analysed above, it provided a channel of identity transition for the traditional scholar-gentry, attenuating their resistance to the New Policies. On the other, by linking official degrees with professional competencies, as in stipulations that “graduates of normal schools be granted the juren degree for normal education, and graduates of the Imperial University’s commercial faculty be granted the juren degree for commerce,” it effectively channelled talents produced by the new learning into education, industry, and commerce, thus averting the social disturbances that might have ensued had qualified candidates all converged single-mindedly on bureaucratic office.

3.2. Inherent Drawbacks

Yet, as a transitional policy bridging the old and new educational systems, the system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts embodied an intrinsic conflict with modern educational ideals and the logic of official selection. As its implementation unfolded, its various drawbacks became undeniable.

First, by directly tethering education to official career paths, the system ran counter to the essential purpose of modern education. Liang Qichao, in his *Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period*, judged that the system merely “lured the men of the realm with the bait of wealth and rank,” and that eight or nine out of every ten students were motivated impurely. Even more gravely, this ethos of “pursuing official emolument through learning” led to the marginalisation of vocational and technical education. The number of law and political science schools proliferated dramatically—“the five law and political science schools in Jiangning, Suzhou, Shanghai, Zhenjiang, and Qingjiang alone enrolled 4,742 students” — while

schools dedicated to agriculture, industry, and commerce languished for want of applicants, precisely because they did not directly lead to official posts. This flatly contradicted the educational principle of emphasising practical learning.

Second, although the system purported to confer official positions according to specialised disciplines, in actual practice it perpetuated the arrangements of the traditional bureaucracy, overlooking the need for division of labour and leading to an immense waste of specialised talent. As Chen Zengyou noted in his Memorial Proposing Flexible Modification of the Regulations on Rewarding School Graduates with Degrees and Posts, the specialised colleges of the university encompassed practical disciplines such as agriculture, industry, commerce, and medicine: “Students of agriculture engage in planting and soil improvement; students of engineering in machine manufacturing”—yet they were indiscriminately “appointed as Hanlin compilers and revisers” or “appointed as magistrates for distribution to fill vacancies in the provinces.” This mode of appointment produced a pervasive phenomenon of “learning being divorced from application,” compelling large numbers of graduates with practical expertise to forsake their professional fields, thus squandering educational resources in an appalling manner.

Third, the design of the system lacked sustainability, and it ultimately forfeited its original function as an incentive. In terms of sheer numbers, the total output of new-style school graduates far outstripped the quota of civil examination degrees conferred in earlier times, making it impossible for all recipients to be assigned substantive official posts. The fixed number of bureaucratic positions combined with the explosive growth in graduates meant that “candidates for office would wait endlessly for vacancies, while those already assigned were grossly overstaffed in sinecures.” This led to situations where, for instance, “in the second year of the Xuantonq reign, over one hundred graduates of the first and second categories of Zhili Higher School obtained the juren degree, yet insufficient official posts were available for them.” As for quality, in the bid to attract students, some schools lowered examination standards, with term and year-end marks being arbitrarily inflated, which in turn eroded the credibility of the civil examination degrees. Under the cumulative weight of these conditions, it was inevitable that the reward system would eventually abolish itself, even if not formally rescinded.

4. Conclusion

The late Qing system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts was a transitional policy that marked China’s educational transformation from the traditional to the modern. Its existence possessed a certain historical inevitability, and it also exhibited unavoidable limitations.

At a time when late Qing society lacked a mature new institution to replace the civil examination system, this system aligned with the pervasive popular longing for official status, bridged the divide in the talent cultivation and official selection

mechanisms, and thereby reduced the resistance to the implementation of new-style education. It thus laid a foundation upon which a modern educational system could be established in the early Republican period; its historical value is undeniable. Nevertheless, the essence of the system never truly broke free from the shackles of the civil examination tradition, and it was consequently fated not to survive over the long term. Though it adopted the modern educational trappings of specialised disciplines, it remained a prolongation of the traditional concept that “excellence in learning guarantees an official career,” breeding an intensely utilitarian academic culture. Its excessive reliance on material incentives neglected education’s intrinsic worth, leaving new-style education perpetually shrouded in the “shadow of the civil examinations.” It was not until the early Republican period, with the promulgation of the University Ordinance and the Secondary School Ordinance, which replaced the conferral of civil examination degrees with graduation diplomas and academic degrees, that modern education in China truly embarked on a path of independent development.

Surveying the entire trajectory of late Qing educational transformation, the waxing and waning of the system of conferring civil examination degrees and official posts facilitated the transition from the old to the new in both education and official selection. Its defects, however, also demonstrate that the modernisation of education can only be genuinely achieved by thoroughly dismantling the traditional idea of “inseparable state-education linkage” and asserting the independent value of education. This insight holds profound implications not only for understanding the evolution of education in modern China but for contemplating ongoing systemic changes in the present day.

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